

# THE IMPLICATIONS OF NCLB AND A NATION AT RISK FOR K-12 SCHOOLS AND HIGHER EDUCATION\*

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## Abstract

The performance of American students in schools is gaining more and more attention at the local, state, and federal levels. Beginning in the late 90s, the attention of many state legislatures and state boards of education shifted to school accountability. This shift remains prevalent. The performance and success of American students are linked to standardized testing. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation mandated standardized testing in several grades in several disciplines. Not only have accountability measures been mandated for students requiring satisfactory scores for promotions, measures are also in place for schools. Based on the performances of all students and several additional variables, schools are assigned school scores and are required to obtain Average Yearly Progress (AYP) (NCLB, 2008). The implementation issues coupled with the implications of NCLB directly align with educators and other vested stakeholders beginning to focus on variables that affect student achievement. Prior to NCLB, A Nation At Risk provided a framework for a similar focus. The implications of both legislations address issues pertinent to students and teachers in K-12 schools, and the implications in higher education focus on teacher preparation programs.



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## 1 Introduction

Improving the performance of American students on standardized tests has been and is a critical area of focus for educators and often policy makers at multiple levels (Kennedy, 2003). Although it is challenging to make generalities linked to any component of education, Americans generally link the performance of our students on standardized testing to the effectiveness of schools; specifically, student performance is linked to the effectiveness of the classroom teachers. One constant challenge for teachers and school leaders is to find strategies and programs that are helpful at improving the quality of instruction in schools. As a country, we have periodically experienced initiatives that focus on math, science, reading, and/or other areas. The development of such initiatives is often linked to national issues.

A focus on mathematics and science in American schools was linked to Russia launching Sputnik in the 50s before America. The focus on reading evolved with reports primarily in the late 80s and 90s that called a greater attention to the large percentage of students exiting high schools who were unable to read. These are two of the examples that can be categorized as reform periods (period one: 50s; period two: 90s;) because of a focus on a specific discipline or a challenge evolving in education as a result of a national issue. The most recent focus developed with the implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB)*.

The *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001* originated in the office of the 43rd President, George Bush. Improving achievement of disadvantaged students, recruitment and training of teachers and principals, language instruction for limited English proficient students, funding for federally impacted areas, reading first and literacy programs, and dropout prevention are among the issues addressed in the legislation. With the election of the forty-fourth president, it will be interesting to observe the future implications of NCLB (NCLB, 2008).

Prior to *NCLB*, *A Nation at Risk*, published by the National Commission on Excellence (1983) prompted educational initiatives. Former President Regan charged the task force to critique the nation's schools. According to Henniger (2004), there were two major changes in education as a result of *A Nation at Risk*; they are higher standards for students and higher standards for teacher preparation programs. In this paper, there is a discussion of the implications of two legislations: *A Nation at Risk* and *No Child Left Behind* and their impacts on K-12 schools and Higher Education.

## 2 Implications as a Result of No Child Left behind and a Nationa at Risk

Although *A Nation at Risk* was implemented nearly twenty years prior to *NCLB*, both legislations focus of similar areas pertinent to improving schools. The wide range of areas addressed in *NCLB* is cited in the introduction of the paper. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* called for a “rising tide of mediocrity” (NCEE, 1983) in American schools. It also identified serious problems with American Education. Some of the findings were:

- the military reports of significant funding on remediation of students straight out of high school,
- the increase in the number of remedial mathematics courses offered at four year institutions by 72 percent,
- lower achievement of students graduating from college,
- steady declines in 1966, 1973, & 1977 in science achievement, and the lack of higher order intellectual skills.

The report also cited additional issues that were directly aligned with poor teaching in classrooms; the following issues were prevalent: there was a need for better curriculum, there were low expectations of students, classroom time was poorly managed, and there was a need to attract better teachers. These findings were so critical due to the demands from industry for higher skilled workers, which were not being produced by schools (NCEE, 1983).

The recommendations made by the task force for improvement of American schools included the strengthening of teacher preparation programs, strengthening academic programs, and the utilization of sophisticated school management procedures. Although there were some differences in how to achieve better quality schools, several others echoed the sentiment of Regan. John Goodland (1984), Theodore Sizer (2004),

William Glasser (1986), and Ernest Boyer (1983) stressed restructuring in the operation of schools. They advocated the use of site-based management, improving school climate, identifying teachers as facilitators of learning, encouraging parental participation in education, and implementing school choice.

Henniger (2004) suggested that as a result of *A Nation at Risk*, changes were initiated in two areas; higher standards for students and more rigorous teacher certification programs. The need to refocus on higher standards for students and rigorous teacher certification was revalidated in *NCLB*. These two issues are highly correlated. To expect more of students requires a higher level of professionalism from teachers. Teachers are perceived as professional and more competent when they are successful at encouraging higher student performance. The effort to raise standards for students as a result of "*A Nation At Risk*" focused on three areas; core curriculum, standards for core subjects, and standardized testing.

Bonnet proposed the core in 1987; the core consisted of four years of English, two years of foreign language, and three years of mathematics, science, and social studies. As many states implemented the core, there was obviously an increase in the number of requirements for graduation, which reduced the number of electives students could take. To increase the standards in the core subjects, professional organizations like the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) supported by the federal government developed reports citing necessary knowledge and skills that students should master (Stringfield et. al, 1994). The Louisiana State Department of Education developed standards/benchmarks and developed curriculum guides based on the standards from the national organizations. Some districts in Louisiana took additional initiatives in developing curriculum documents across grade levels to make certain that teachers address specific skills.

The use of standardized testing began in the military, and by 1950 almost all sectors of society were using them (Kennedy, 2003). As I previously cited, the early 90s era saw an influx of high stakes testing. There is a refocusing on the emphases of standardized testing with the implementation of *NCLB*. The Bracey (2003) report also described where the nation is shifting as it relates to standardized tests. Students enrolled in grades three through eight in all schools in the nation are required to take standardized tests in reading and mathematics. It will be critical for schools to demonstrate AYP. The AYP is based primarily on the performance of students on standardized tests along with attendance and drop-out rate (when applicable). Schools can achieve AYP only if all major socioeconomic groups, ethnic groups, English language learners, and special education students achieve AYP. In the event that one of the subgroups fails to show AYP, the entire school fails (*NCLB*, 2008).

As a result of *A Nation at Risk* initially followed by the mandates in *NCLB*, teacher education candidates in teacher education preparation programs are completing additional teacher certification requirements. The higher standards for future teachers target the following four areas: testing requirements, curriculum requirements, and the introduction of field experiences requirements earlier, and continuing requirements after graduation. Students in teacher education preparation programs presently take entrance and exit tests. In some instances, there are additional standards and/or assessments throughout the program (Henniger, 2004). Institutions that are accredited by the National Council for Teacher Accreditation are required to have a minimum of four transition points that provide documented evidence of student progress. Examples of documented evidence include but are not limited to grade point averages, scores on writing samples, interview scores, and praxis scores.

*NCLB* mandated that teachers are "highly qualified," which has strengthen the focus initiated as a result of *A Nation at Risk*. Teachers are required to demonstrate content and methodology competencies. Henniger (2004) stated that many states are requiring students to pass all parts of the Praxis tests prior to graduation. The second challenge for teacher education candidates is the focus on improved curriculum. Teacher candidates are required to take more content specific courses and maintain higher grade point averages. The third adjustment is the focus on the inclusion of field experiences earlier in preparation programs. In Louisiana, all institutions were required to redesign teacher education preparation programs in 2003. Among the foci of the redesign efforts was the inclusion of field experiences throughout the program as well as improvements in curriculum. Candidates who entered teacher preparation programs in the Summer 2003 and those thereafter are required to complete 180 hours of field experiences prior to student teaching. Obviously, teacher education candidates are engaging in more field experiences, and the experiences begin earlier.

The fourth challenge for future teachers is for teachers to engage in continuing education following initial certification. According to Henniger (2004), states are moving away from lifetime certificates. Teachers are being required to take additional college credits or earn Master degrees. In Louisiana, teachers completing preparation programs after Summer 2003 are required to earn 150 hours service-learning credits in a five-year period to have certification renewed.

### 3 Summary

A largely debated issue with initiatives like NCLB and *A Nation at Risk* is the emphasis on standardized tests particularly for K-12 students. Proponents of standardized testing suggest that tests and standards “put fire under lazy school districts, teachers, and students” (Wiener, May 2001). Opponents say that emphasis on tests leads to so much preparation that many important aspects of education become a low priority, or they are ignored. In addition, schools provide less of a differentiated curriculum. Bracey (2003) cites Ralston in his 13<sup>th</sup> Bracey report suggested that “Improving education will always improve scores on well-designed tests. But when the central aim is just to improve test scores, improved education is seldom the result.”

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